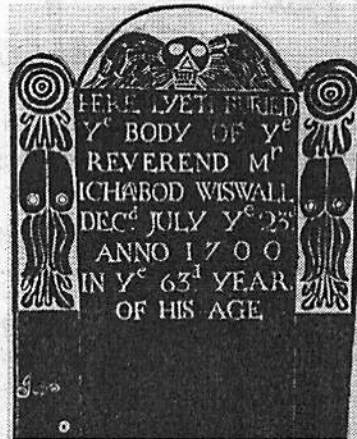


No squid on Chestnut Street

By JOE SHEA,
SPECIAL TO THE CLIPPER

[Joseph Shea, who died earlier this week, long held a passion for Duxbury's history, especially its cemeteries. He submitted this article on a curious gravestone in the Chestnut Street graveyard only last week. -Ed.]

In the fall of 2010 a question arose on the internet about the grave stone of the Reverend Ichabod Wiswall buried in the Old Burial Ground on Chestnut Street. Wiswall was the third pastor of the Church of Christ in Duxborough. That church has evolved into the current First Parish Church Unitarian Universalist on Tremont Street. He served 23 years and died in 1700. Some people, looking at the stone, it is in good shape, have determined that it shows squid or jelly fish or at least some form of cephalopod along the outside edges. The Duxbury Rural and Historical Society had no answers to the phone inquiries. Wisall is most widely remembered as the first minister in British North America to offer a sermon at grave side for the deceased. He did so at the burial "under arms" of Captain Jonathan Alden in February 1697. Prior to his actions, it was felt that one's afterlife had been predetermined and thus it was not a custom to pray over graves. Who would dare to attempt to intervene with God? Wiswall started to break down that notion.



The grave of Rev. Ichabod Wiswall, located in Standish Cemetery, has a curious illustration that some have called a squid. Not so, according to the writer's research.

Photo from the American Antiquarian Society.

Earlier in Duxbury, he was fascinated with the arrival of what came to be called a "Great Comet" that was visible from early December 1680 until March 1681. It was the first comet ever found first by a telescope, but it was so big and came very close to earth that no one could miss it. The tail was estimated as more than 30,000,000 miles long. Its arrival struck terror in the hearts and minds all over the world which was then

a very superstitious place. Comets had always presaged disasters. It was so bright and passed so close to earth that it could be seen in the daytime with the naked eye. It is not known if he saw a comet in London but had likely seen the comet that passed over Duxbury on the 15th of September 1682. That comet was quite visible and inspired a lot of interest. It was later identified as a regular earth visitor. Years after Wiswall's death, Edmund Hally identified the frequency of those visits and predicted future appearances. For this effort, the 1682 comet was given his name. The "Great Comet of 1680"

has since been called Kirch's Comet after the German who first found the comet by telescope. It has also been called Newton's Comet since it allowed Newton to prove some scientific theories of the time. Ichabod was so interested and struck by what he saw that he wrote a poem which he shipped off to England for publication in 1683. In the tradition of the times, it was a very long poem of more than 3,000 words (16 pages). That poem about the comet is the only item of 17th century literature of Ichabod Wiswall to survive. So enthralled was he that he shifted his attention to the study of astrology (astronomy) for the rest of his life.

Upon his death in 1700 the stone carver, John Noyes of Boston, was engaged to prepare the slate stone now found in the Burial Ground. John Noyes was also a silversmith of some renown, which would explain the intricacy of some of the detail on the slate gravestone. Those details reflected the focus of Ichabod's life in his later years.

The meaning of the carving has slipped from popular memory but it is apparent that they represent the comet with the sun at the top and comet below and the huge tail always away from the sun. Thus there are no squid on Chestnut Street.